

Revelation 19:1-9 (NIV)

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, ² for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."

³ *And again they shouted: "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever."*

⁴ *The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: "Amen, Hallelujah!"*

⁵ *Then a voice came from the throne, saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both great and small!"*

⁶ *Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.*

⁷ *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."*

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)

⁹ *Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God."*

We're in Revelation, Chapter 19, if you'd care to turn back there in your Bible. Revelation 19. We'll get there in a couple minutes.

We were away for a week of vacation over last Sunday, and, Lord willing, we'll be gone again for a couple days in a couple weeks. So, I'll talk about what I learned over summer vacation after I return from that second trip – in case you were wondering.

It's nice to be able to leave and feel total confidence that things will be just fine while you're gone; although, I will admit that on our way back into town from vacation, as we pass by Thomson Hood and the Metcalfs there on KY-29 just north of us, I always look toward the church buildings, and I am always strangely relieved to see them still standing.

If you've been with us for the past few weeks, you know we've been talking about the Church as being Jesus' bride – Jesus' wife, which means that even though every indication is that Jesus was single His whole earthly life, Jesus was, and is, also married. Jesus knows what marriage is like, and He can help us understand what marriage is to be.

So, "What is marriage, really?"

A lot of people have asked that question through the ages. Our culture has wrestled with it, in fact.

"What is marriage?"

"Why do people get married?"

Lots of people have asked that question, too – some after it was too late.

"What is marriage, and why do people get married?"

Some never do, I realize. Some of you have not, or have not yet. Some do not by their own choice, some by God's will and plan, and some for other reasons.

And that's all well and good. Singleness is valid and legitimate, and I might say that our society in general, and the church in particular, should do far better in affirming that.

Today, though, the question remains, "What is marriage, and why would persons want to be married?"

Well, there are *consequences* of marriage, including blessings that arise from marriage that are attractive to many.

For example, marriage is a method of companionship. Some people marry because they don't want to be alone.

Marriage is one way of having children – of becoming a parent.

Marriage is the path to sexual enjoyment as God designed it.

Marriage is a way to have someone look out for you, or even look after you, in sickness or in age.

Marriage is economical in many ways. It's cheaper for two to live together than to live separately: cheaper housing, cheaper utilities, cheaper food in many ways, cheaper taxes.

These are just some of the benefits of marriage, and I must say, I've known people who have gotten married expressly to get for themselves some of those benefits.

I've known a few people, unfortunately, who've married to get just one of those benefits – and you probably know which benefit I'm talking about.

But you know, as great as those and other benefits of marriage are, they do not, neither separately nor together, define marriage.

Marriage is far more than the "sum of its parts."

So, what is marriage?

Well, to dare to boil it down to one word, I would suggest that marriage is: *connection*. Or even better, marriage is *union* – and *specifically*, the *deepest, most intimate union possible*.

Marriage is union.

Now, some people don't see it that way, and they certainly don't treat it that way. Some people marry only to achieve something for *themselves*. But those who marry only to *get*: as long as that is their purpose, they will never truly connect with another, and in those cases, *union* never really, completely happens.

And that is unfortunate and sad, because that's just not marriage as God designed it to be.

Union is much more than just a man and a woman seeking personal gain.

Of course, it's obvious, biologically, that God designed men and women for physical union with each other. Anyone who's taken a fifth-grade health class knows that—or should.

What's not so obvious, though still very true, is that God designed men and women for emotional and mental and spiritual union as well:

Men and women giving all of themselves to one another, as completely as they know how to do.

That's union. That's marriage.

All of me for all of you.

All of you for all of me.

Whole selves giving whole selves one to another.

And the key word there is "giving."

Which is why, of course, that people who marry in order to *get* something for themselves, whether that's companionship or sex or kids or a caregiver or a tax break or whatever: people who wind up marrying in order to *get* typically wind up disillusioned and disappointed and more and more often, divorced.

They married in order to *get*.

But marriage is, chiefly, about giving, and if there is any doubt about that, we need only to look at the example of Jesus and the Church.

We've seen in these past weeks that marriage is the metaphor—the illustration that God gives us—for the relationship He wants to have with us.

That means we can understand the sort of relationship God wants to have with us through what we know of human marriage.

At the same time though, our understanding of human marriage is deepened: we can see human marriage at its fullest and best—as God designed it to be—in God's relationship with us, and especially through Jesus and the Church.

God intends the two realities to build on each other to help us better understand—and to take us deeper and deeper into *union*.

What God wants—what God is after—is *union*.

And *not* union with *everything*, either. *Not* union with His *whole created order*.

As great as they are, God's not out for union with dogs or trees or lizards or rocks or hydrangea bushes.

Union is special, and it's reserved for people, for humans, for us whom He made in His own image.

Regardless of what the unbelieving world tries to tell us, we are different. People are different. God made us different from all other creation.

He made us for union with Himself.

What does that mean?

Well, similar to human marriage, it does not mean the elimination of self or individuality. We are all people: God-made, uniquely created, uniquely gifted.

Union doesn't eliminate that.

Marriage is not the eradication of self.

Marriage is that way: marriage is that union that helps us rightly understand self, and that the true

worth of self will never be found in what we get, but rather in what we give to others.

That's what's so important about union, you see?

Union is inextricably bound up with giving.

You can't experience true union without giving.

That's why the most peaceful, settled, joy-filled people are those who are living in true union with God.

By the way, that's also why the happiest human marriages are between those who understand the union of being married to Him before they are married to anyone else.

Union is bound up with giving.

You can't experience true union without giving.

And, of course, the ultimate example of giving, lived out, is Jesus.

Early on in this series, I said that a study of the Church, Jesus' bride, will tell us far more about Jesus than about us.

And that is so true, because you can't ever hope to have a real marriage—you can't ever hope to have true union—without at least one of the two members completely committed to giving.

We've seen how God the Father, in the Old Testament, and then Jesus the Son, in the New Testament, give and give and give and give—to people, to us, to the pinnacle of creation—all for the sake of union.

God made us.

He loves us.

He wants us to love Him—to be connected with Him.

But He's given us the choice to love Him, because there is no forced love.

To quote that renowned theologian, George Strait, "You can't make a heart love somebody. You can tell it what to do, but it won't listen at all. You can't make a heart love somebody. You can lead a heart to love, but you can't make it fall."

The whole story of this great dance between God and humanity is a repeated giving and giving and giving on God's part—inviting, enticing His creation back to Himself—ultimately through the giving of the life of Jesus.

"Surely they will love me when they remember how I've cared for them."

"Surely they will love me when they recall how I've provided for them."

"Surely they will love me when they realize how much I've helped them."

"Surely they will love me when they see me die for them."

"Surely they will come back to me: they will want the union with me that we had in the garden, the union that I still want with them for their own blessing and for their own good."

"Surely they will want me again."

Do you realize that that's how God thinks about us?

It's true!

This is what the Almighty One *does*, and this is how the Almighty One *gives*—for the sake of *union* with *us*!

You know, we see a phrase there in verse 6 of Revelation 19, "*the Lord God Almighty.*" That word, "almighty," is used only ten times in the whole New Testament, nine of them here in Revelation.

It means: "the One who controls all things."

And yet He doesn't control His beloveds' hearts.

So, He gives Himself to prove His love to them.

The fact is, nearly the whole Bible is the accounting, the telling, of all the ways God gives Himself in pursuit of union – re-union – with those He made and loves.

He gives Himself for the sake of reuniting Himself once and for all with all people – with us people who will chose to love Him and give ourselves, in return, to Him.

To give our whole selves to Him, as completely as we know how to do.

That's the way to union, you see?

God's already done it. In Jesus, He's given all of Him for us, and He invites us to give all of ourselves to Him.

In marriage. In union.

So, there might be re-union.

There was a duet in the late 70's – 1978, I think: a man and a woman, called Peaches and Herb. Their one and only song that made it big was called, "Reunited," and it's been playing in my mind ever since I got into this passage.

Of course, they were singing about a couple breaking up and getting back together.

But so much of the sentiment applies to the way God feels about us.

He wants, and has done all He can do, that we might be reunited with Him again.

That's why in this passage there is so much celebration.

There are more "hallelujahs – praise Gods" in this little passage than anywhere else in Scripture.

Why? Because a re-union is coming.

The great crowd in Heaven shouts it over and over.

The twenty-four elders were shouting it. They represent the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles: the whole of the Church, God's people, both Testaments, you see?

Everyone is shouting "Praise God," because of His salvation, His glory, His power, and His just and true judgment.

But they're especially shouting praise because, as verse seven there tells us, "*... the wedding of the Lamb has come!*"

The reunion between God and His people is at hand.

The bride has not only been declared holy – she has become holy, and her beauty and purity are stunning.

This is the coming of the rule of God.

The consummation of God's victory.

The completion of the redemption of creation.

But even more, it's the restoration of the goal of creation from the beginning: God's desire for the deepest, most perfect, most blessed union possible.

With us!

That it finally happens here is almost too good to be true, especially for people who have been persecuted and harassed for their faith.

But it does happen. The reunion of the bride and Groom.

All because of the immense love and mercy and grace of God the Father.

All because of the giving of Jesus.

All of Him for all of us.

He gave His whole self for us.

The question we all have to answer is, "Will we give our whole self for Him?"

You see, that's the way – the only way – to re-union.

Divine reunion.

We don't want to miss that.

God doesn't want anyone to miss it.

Something that's worthy of all this celebration! It's nothing less than the goal – the culmination of creation!

The great marriage – the great reunion.

We don't want to miss it.

God doesn't want us to miss it.

But He leaves the choice to us.

Will you be there?

Will you participate in this great reunion – the marriage supper of the Lamb?

You have the invitation.

God has given all He can give to make it so.

Will you hold no part of yourself back and give all to Him in return?

Prayer:

Father, we thank You for this image. We thank You for this reality. We thank You for the grace and the mercy that You have poured out upon us: all that You have given and continue to give to demonstrate Your love for us. Lord, You have given all, all that You can. Lord, help us to give all of ourselves to You in return, so the wedding feast, this wedding ceremony, might include every person here, every person in all of our families represented here, so there will be great joy in the coming together with You and with one another. Lord, help us to see how much You love us, and help us never to take that love and that giving for granted. We look forward to that day, Lord, in Your time and in Your way, and we offer ourselves to You. In Jesus' name, Amen

Closing Song: *Oh Jesus, I Have Promised*

Benediction:

May Christ dwell in our hearts through faith – that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love – that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.

May it be so. Amen. Go in peace.